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March Classroom Connect "Guest Expert" column:

Support for Service-Learning Online

By Judi Harris

Chances are, students and teachers at your school are involved in some type of service-learning this year. More than 64% of all U.S. public schools arrange community service for students, and at least 32% have incorporated service-learning into the curriculum – including about half of all high schools (http://www.seanetonline.org/nat_facts.cfm).

Why, in this time of strong emphasis upon high-stakes testing results, is service-learning – something not typically measured with standardized tests – so prevalent? A recent report from the National Commission on Service-Learning suggests that this is a reflection of two current, but independent, trends in our youths' experiences.

There is a paradox here. At the same time that academic and civic disengagement is rampant, primary and secondary school students are volunteering in record numbers for community service activities, from tutoring children in low-income neighborhoods to spending time with the elderly. There seems to be a serious disconnection between the volunteer spirit that students are expressing in their spare time and what transpires during the school day.

(http://learningindeed.org/slcommission/execsumm_word.doc)

Participating in service-learning projects – especially those with strong connections to standards-based curricula – can bring service-oriented, authentic learning into K-12 classrooms in unique and powerful ways.

What is Service-Learning?

According to the National Service-Learning Exchange, service-learning "is a method of teaching that enriches learning by engaging students in meaningful service to their schools or communities through careful integration with established curricula." (<http://www.nslexchange.org/>) The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse emphasizes that participation in service-learning must "change both the recipient and the provider of the service." This means that service-learning activities must provide opportunities for students' "...self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content."

(http://www.servicelearning.org/welcome/SL_is/index.html)

Web-based resources and online communication can greatly assist and enrich service learning experiences for both teachers and students.

Online Service-Learning Projects and Resources

Though most service-learning is arranged and completed locally, some service-learning projects have online components. Resources, arrangements, and outcomes for service work done locally can be shared online – and an increasing amount of service-learning is done primarily or exclusively via the Internet.

There are four ways in which online resources and communication can assist and structure service-learning.

1. Service-learning can be coordinated and done locally, with outcomes shared via the Web.

For example, the Random Acts of Kindness of the Month project (<http://www.angelfire.com/ny/ProjectKAVE/random1.html>), coordinated by a teacher in Brooklyn, invites teachers from all over the world to report monthly on an act of kindness done by one of their students. Information about both the kindness and its perpetrator is shared on the project's Web site, with hopes that this will inspire others to similar action.

In another example of service-learning of this first type, students participating in the Community NET-Workers project (<http://www.communitynetworkers.org/>) collaborate with community members to create Web sites for local nonprofit groups.

2. Service-learning can be coordinated online, then done locally and shared on the Web.

For example, the Earth Day Groceries Project (<http://www.earthdaybags.org/>), coordinated by a teacher in Seattle and in its tenth year of operation, helps classes from all over the world observe Earth Day each April. Following the guidelines and suggestions offered at the project's Web site, participating students decorate paper grocery bags with pro-environmental messages, then distribute their works to customers to use at local grocery stores on April 22nd. They report on their activities at the project's Web site.

The international Global Youth Service Day (<http://gysd.net/home/index.html>) – scheduled for April 11th through 13th this year -- is another event-based project that is coordinated and shared online. Like the Earth Day Groceries Project, students' service is done locally. Do Something (<http://dosomething.org/index.cfm>), a Web-based, youth-run project, invites students year-round to "identify the issues you care about and create

community projects to turn your ideas into action," providing resources and communication venues to assist this local service-learning.

3. Service-learning can be coordinated, completed, *and* shared online.

Some service-learning projects take place entirely online: from planning through post-project reflection. The United Nations' Schools Demining Schools project (<http://www0.un.org/cyberschoolbus/banmines/index.asp>), for example, raises consciousness about undetonated landmines hiding in places where children walk and play. Participants learn about this problem so that they can support, through fundraising activities, demining initiatives in their own and other countries. While doing so, they communicate with demining experts, UN workers, surviving landmine victims, and students who use the areas being rid of the landmines. They also participate in a Web-based "Ban Landmines" banner campaign.

Similarly, in the I*EARN-sponsored Clean Water for Nicaragua Project (<http://www.iearn.org/projects/cleanwater.html>), students from around the world raise money to dig wells and install rope-operated water pumps in Nicaraguan villages, thus helping to reduce illness caused by drinking polluted water. The project also facilitates communication between children in the villages with new pumps and students who raised the funds to install them, so that those giving the service can learn of its effects in a personal way.

4. Resources that can assist with planning, coordinating, and completing all types of service-learning are available on the Web.

The following service-learning "mega-sites" should prove informative and helpful to all types of K-12 service-learning work.

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse:
<http://www.servicelearning.org/>

National Service-Learning Exchange:
<http://www.nslexchange.org/>

Learning In Deed:
<http://learningindeed.org/index.html>

Learn and Serve America:
<http://learnandserve.org/>

Learn, Serve & Surf: An Internet Resource Kit for service-learning practitioners:
<http://www.edb.utexas.edu/servicelearning/index.html>

Volunteer Match:

<http://www.volunteermatch.org/>

Why do service-learning?

According to the National Commission's report, "studies show that when service-learning is explicitly connected to curriculum, young people make gains on achievement tests, complete their homework more often, and increase their grade point averages. Service-learning is associated with both increased attendance and reduced dropout rates. In comparison with peers, students who engage in service-learning show less alienation and exhibit fewer behavior problems. Students who engage in service-learning activities increase their knowledge of community needs, become committed to an ethic of service, and develop a more sophisticated understanding of politics and morality."

(http://learningindeed.org/slcommission/execsumm_word.doc)

With such compelling reasons to include service-learning in K-12 curricula, and such rich resources available online to support these efforts, service-learning can flourish in Internet-connected classrooms.

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